

The University of Chicago

CHILD-REARING AND SOCIAL
STATUS

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE
SOCIAL SCIENCES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT
1945

By
MARTHA C. ERICSON

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ABSTRACT

Interviews with 48 middle-class and 52 lower-class mothers reveal that there are cultural differences in their child-rearing practices. Lower-class parents tend to be more permissive; middle-class children are made anxious by social pressure and suffer more frustration in learning. Early assumption of responsibility for the person and conformity to the group is more important to middle-class than to lower-class families.

The main problem of this investigation was to test the hypothesis that, since differing social classes represent different learning environments for children, systematic differences in child-rearing practices could be found. A secondary problem of the investigation was to study the effects of training procedures on the development of personality.

The procedures used included the interviewing of 100 mothers, of whom 48 were middle class and 52 were lower class. A guided interview schedule was developed for this purpose. Histories of training procedures were obtained for 107 middle-class children and for 167 lower-class children.

Although there have been some studies dealing with comparisons of "privileged" and "underprivileged" children, there appears to have been only one other study¹ which has attempted to deal with systematic class differences in child-rearing practices. Anderson's differentiation of the social classes was made on the basis of the Minnesota Scale for Occupational Classification; this scale did not take into account some of the other factors used for purposes of social stratification in the present study (education of grandparents, parents and parents' siblings, occupations of parents' siblings, and landownership of parents).

The method of interviewing in the present study provided for extended comments on the part of the mothers rather than for answers adapted to the mechanics of Hollerith analysis, as in Anderson's study. The interviewing in the present investigation was done by specifically trained people rather than by

members of various social and child-welfare agencies, as in Anderson's investigation: hence the results of the two investigations are not strictly comparable.

Extensive interviewing.—In order to obtain data on a large number of middle- and lower-class families, a schedule for a guided interview was developed. This schedule consisted of eighteen pages of questions and was intended to be used with mothers of children under the age of seven years, since mothers of children in this age range would be likely to give relatively more accurate information than mothers of older children. The interview schedules were arranged so that answers given by the mothers could be recorded verbatim. The time required to complete an interview schedule varied with the skill of the interviewer and the verbal ability of the mother; most of the interviews required from one to three hours for completion.

The schedules for the guided interview were divided into two parts, the first of which attempted to deal with the child as an individual, recording his progress through such crucial matters as weaning and cleanliness training. The second part of the interview dealt with family expectations for school training, ages at which children would be given various privileges and responsibilities, and data concerning the background of the parents.

The data obtained with reference to the parents included occupation of both parents, education of the parents, and education and occupation of the parents' siblings. Club membership of parents and landownership of both grandparents and parents were also included, as well as ethnic groups. These

¹ John Anderson, *Young Child in the Home* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1936).

items were used for the purpose of placing the families on a social scale. Neighborhood and house type were not used for purposes of stratification because of the complexity of the communities represented. The stratification of the families was done by an expert in this field and by the writer.

The sample.—The 48 middle-class mothers interviewed were relatively established in their class. These mothers were reached through nursery schools and through child-study groups. All were residents of Chicago. There were 107 children in this sample; all children whose histories were recorded were normal children.

The 52 lower-class mothers who were interviewed were relatively stable in status and were, for the most part, upper lower-class, and all were residents of Chicago. There were 167 children in this group. All children whose histories were recorded were normal children.

Characteristics of middle- and lower-class families.—The differences to be found between middle- and lower-class families are clearly group differences. There are unquestionably many families, both middle and lower class, which, upon closer examination, would deviate markedly from the central tendencies found in this study. The findings with regard to these two groups, however, are clearly enough differentiated to permit generalization.

In the middle-class families it was found that the educational level of both maternal and paternal grandparents was higher than that of the grandparents in the lower-class families. The educational level of the parents and of the parents' siblings was also higher than that of the lower-class families. The occupations of middle-class parents and parents' siblings fell into the first four categories (the highest) of the seven-point occupational classification developed for this study, while the occupations of the lower-class parents and parents' siblings fell mainly into the lowest three categories of the occupational classification.

Method of statistical analysis.—The data from the guided interview schedules were

coded and recorded for punching on Hollerith cards. Some of the differences were not statistically significant; but it should be remembered that the sample was small and that these differences, in order to be reliable, had to be relatively large. The differences, therefore, were important ones.

Results.—The hypothesis which this study investigated was that systematic class differences in training could be found. The general areas explored were those of weaning, thumbsucking, cleanliness training, environmental exploration and control, and age and sex roles. Differences were found in certain areas; these were primarily in feeding, cleanliness training, environmental exploration and control, and age and sex roles. Middle-class families were generally found to be more exacting in their expectations. Training was generally begun earlier in the middle-class than in the lower-class families. In the middle-class families there was more emphasis on early responsibility, closer supervision of children's activities, and greater emphasis on individual achievement.

Early feeding experiences.—Significant differences were found in early feeding experiences of children. In the middle-class families, fewer children are breast-fed; where they are breast-fed, they tend to be breast-fed for a shorter time. Fewer middle-class children than lower-class children are completely breast-fed. Middle-class children also tend to be bottle-fed for a shorter period of time than are the lower-class children. Three times as many middle-class children as lower-class children were reported as thumbsuckers.

Cleanliness training.—Significant differences were found in the cleanliness training of the children in the two classes. Middle-class parents begin training their children for bowel and bladder control earlier than do the lower-class parents, although the middle-class children do not achieve control earlier than the lower-class children. Boys in both classes were found to be more difficult to train than girls.

Age expectations and sex roles.—Several class differences in age expectations and sex

roles were found. The main difference was that children in middle-class families were expected to assume responsibility in the home earlier than were the lower-class children. Middle-class girls are expected to begin cooking and sewing earlier than the lower-class girls. Middle-class boys and girls are expected to be in the house earlier at night than the lower-class boys and girls. Lower-class children begin going to the movies alone earlier than the middle-class children; and many more of the lower-class children are paid for errands and for working than are the middle-class children. Middle-class children, on the other hand, are expected to prepare themselves for some profession.

The results of this investigation thus show that there are systematic social class differences in training children in crucial matters. Middle-class children and lower-class children live in well-differentiated cultures. Even though training is begun earlier in the middle class, it is not achieved any earlier. Middle-class children are probably subjected to more

frustration in learning and are probably more anxious as a result of these pressures than are the lower-class children. Lower-class families tend to be more lenient in the training of their children.

Children in the middle-class families are taught to assume responsibility early, are more carefully supervised, and have less free time. We had anticipated that lower-class parents would expect the early assumption of responsibility in the home on the part of their children. This is, however, not the case; the lower-class children are not taught these tasks until an age at which the learning has become relatively easy. The latter probably do not meet as many frustrations as do the middle-class children.

This investigation confirms the theory that membership in a social class is an important influence on personality development and that there are significant differences in child-rearing practices between social classes.

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